



Scholarly Use of Renaissance Printed Books

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IN SURVEYING RECENT scholarship concerned with books printed during the Renaissance, it is useful to examine the methods which were used in some of the major landmarks of recent research, and to consider how the authors developed their material. The very field, it should be remembered, is largely an interdisciplinary one, involving scholars with many different academic backgrounds. Their aims are also quite different, as are their methods. While this diversity might appear to frustrate any generalizations to be drawn by the librarian, several very important conclusions will nevertheless be seen to present themselves.

The major use of books printed during the Renaissance derives from the revolution that the invention of printing introduced in the intellectual life of Europe during the sixteenth century. For the first time in Western history, scholarship was able to proceed simultaneously on many fronts.¹

This change was essentially a qualitative one, but also one brought about by a revolutionary increase in the quantity of books available. Because of the number of copies created by the printing process, many topics of inquiry and of public interest (not to define scholarship too narrowly) no longer had to depend for survival and development on hand-copying. Theologians, classical humanists, vernacular authors, political and religious polemicists, legal scholars, scientists, travelers, chroniclers, newswriters, and historians could all follow and record their own thoughts and interests. These developments were brought about only in part by relative economies in production: the volume which resulted made possible even greater economies in distribution,² enabling more people in more places to own more books, and providing them with the means and motivation to write more books of their own. Such events seem to have stimulated

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the inception of both a wider reading public and the proliferation of specialized audiences.

These events from 1450 to 1700 created a bibliography of great range and variation in quality. Despite the reputation for scholarly care enjoyed by the great printers, such as Aldus Manutius in Venice, Arnao Guillen de Brocar in Alcalá de Henares, Johan Froben in Basel, Robert Estienne in Paris, Christoph Plantin in Antwerp, and the Elseviers in Leyden (to name some of the most famous), not all of their colleagues were equally skilled or discriminating. Some texts were bad, but they were not revised. "A bad text on a seemingly important subject would continue in circulation," wrote Rudolf Hirsch in 1967.³ Curt Bühler had enlarged on the subject of fifteenth-century books somewhat earlier: "The large bulk of publication has, at all times and in every age been dedicated to the publication of useless trash—often not even entertaining stupidities. . . . Every book, however, has some significance for its own period." The desire to evaluate that significance forces the scholar to look at the whole range of printed books, the bad as well as the good.

One of the most striking examples of a scholar's attempt to evaluate the whole bibliography of a period is H. S. Bennett's monumental three-volume survey of English books and readers and the English book trade from 1475 to 1640.⁴ Citing and often quoting from thousands of books published during the period, he discusses such subjects as translations, religious polemics, Bibles, catechisms, devotional literature, sermons, gallows scenes, law, education, medicine, herbals, husbandry, arithmetic, astronomy, science, geography and travel, history, news, witchcraft, and literature.

Bennett's work was a labor of decades, but it must be pointed out that he could not have done it at all without the preceding work of other scholars over a longer range of decades. Essential was the *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640*, compiled by A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave.⁵ No such comprehensive list exists for any other major country over this time period. To assist him in analyzing the book trade, Bennett used Paul Morrison's *Index of Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers in A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave*.⁶ To help him divide the list into his chronological periods, he had available the chronological list of the more than 26,000 items prepared by the research department of the Huntington Library—a tool that has been legendary among students in university English courses, but never made generally available.⁷

The necessary reliance of Bennett on earlier bibliographical scholarship included sources long preceding the *Short-Title Catalogue* and its derivatives. Arber's *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers*⁸ and the *Records of the Court of the Stationers' Company*⁹ begun by Greg and Boswell and carried on by Jackson were cited constantly, as were the well-articulated series of biographical dictionaries of printers, publishers and booksellers.

Original copies of the books listed in the *Short-Title Catalogue* were accessible to Bennett mostly in a few great libraries—the British Museum and the Cambridge University Library in England, and the Houghton, Folger, and Huntington libraries in the United States. He also pays generous acknowledgment to the library of the University of Chicago: "Thanks to the enlightened policy of the authorities, the University has a large collection of microfilms of these books, and a wealth of equipment for their use. During my stay there as visiting Professor I made almost daily use of these facilities, and my work profited accordingly."¹⁰

In range, comprehensiveness, varied points of access, and well-considered articulation, the bibliographical tools for the study of English books printed from 1475 to 1700 have no equal. Of course, with modern technology and organization, they could be improved. If the *Short-Title Catalogue* were in machine-readable form, for example, it would be much easier to sort out books by dates, printers, publishers, booksellers, and formats than it now is. If centralized depositories, such as the Center for Research Libraries, had funds to pay for the cost of sending out microform copies of *Short-Title Catalogue* books on demand to scholars in institutions which have no microfilm collections of them, the access would be improved—although it would hardly be feasible to send out copies on the scale Bennett used them.

In some contrast to Bennett's work is the work of Peter Bietenholz, *Basle and France in the Sixteenth Century: The Basle Humanists and Printers in their Contacts with Francophone Culture*.¹¹ Like Bennett, he was interested in a large bibliography of books as applied to a large group of readers: publications of French-speaking authors intended for distribution to a French-speaking public. First he had the problem of identifying the Francophone writers published in Basel. For that task, and in order to discuss them authoritatively, he relied heavily on the work of preceding scholars and on modern critical editions; humanistic scholarship is partly cumulative, at least. However, he did have to compile his own bibliography. For this, he was able to rely on special bibliographies and on special works such as the guide to Basel

printers' marks by Heitz and Bernouilli, and Josef Benzing's very useful *Die Buchdrucker des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts im deutschen Sprachgebiet*.¹²

Beyond these fragmentary aids, a major task for Bietenholz was then to compile a list of books published in Basel from 1470 to 1650 by Francophone authors, editors, translators, and contributors, and by subjects relating to France. The problem was complicated because, for reasons of religious and cultural conflict, some books printed in Basel did not bear a Basel imprint, while others that were printed outside liked to draw on the prestige of a Basel printer by using a false Basel imprint. In his search, Bietenholz used the Basel University Library collection and the unpublished catalog of printers maintained there, proceeding next to the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris and the British Museum. From these sources, he compiled a list of 1,049 books published in Basel, 115 dissertations printed by 1650 (of which most are represented only by a single copy in the University Library), 34 books printed for Conrad Resch at the Ecu de Bâle in Paris, and 22 fictitious Basel imprints.

To identify his books, Bietenholz relied heavily on printers' devices and ornaments. These show up well in photoreproduction, and he might have carried on a large share of this work with a microform collection (notwithstanding occasional problems of scale), if such a collection existed and had he not needed to travel to another city to view it, thus encountering some of the same expenses he must have had at Basel, Paris and London. (Even under these circumstances, however, he would have lacked the important assistance of Mme. Veyrin Forrer of the Bibliothèque nationale who directed him to the notes of P. Renouard for the list of books printed for Conrad Resch.)

In fact, no such collection of microforms now exists. *The Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in the German-Speaking Countries and German Books Printed in Other Countries from 1455 to 1600 now in the British Museum*¹³ is in the process of microreproduction, but it represents the collection of only one library, covers only up to 1600, and is not completely reproduced. If we are looking for ways to help scholars who are making use of printed books of the Renaissance, we will need to remember for some time to come the relative economy and fruitfulness of travel grants and fellowships.

This is not to deprecate the value of photographic copies. Renaissance scholars, like other scholars, students, and public library patrons, find photographic copies of one sort or another the least

laborious and most satisfactory way of taking notes. Before the days of photocomposition, of course, the original printed book had to be preserved somewhere in order for a copy to be made. When photocopies are available, however, they can sometimes serve purposes that originals cannot, for they can be cut apart and rearranged in tables to clarify an argument. Ivan Kaldor's "Slavic Paleography and Early Russian Printing"¹⁴ illustrates this technique. Part of Kaldor's problem was to explain the genesis of the Civil Type commissioned by Peter the Great and developed between 1703 and 1710. By cutting apart copies of specimens, he was able to present a letter-by-letter tabular comparison of various Dutch and Russian experiments with casting Cyrillic characters.¹⁵

Some Renaissance scholarship is bibliographical and has as a major goal the ordering of editions. This depends on the artifactual book. *The Problem of the Missale Speciale*, by Allan Stevenson¹⁶ is a brilliant example. His problem was to date a book that had such widely varying attributions as 1450 and 1472. In approaching the problem, Stevenson dutifully and clearly set forth the reasoning and conclusions of previous scholars with appropriate citations to their work, demonstrating that a collection to support Renaissance studies properly needs to hold the records of modern scholarship. From that, he proceeded to his own particular specialty, the analysis of watermarks in paper.

Working on the hypothesis of Claude Briquet that watermarks in paper have a short life in the productive process, Stevenson examined the watermarks in the *Missale Speciale* (commonly called the Constance Missal), an undated book that some scholars had concluded, from typographical and textual evidence, was printed before the 42-line Bible (commonly regarded as the first *book* in western Europe printed from movable metal type). In pursuit of his method, Stevenson had to examine all the extant copies of the *Missale Speciale* and the *Missale Abbreviatum* to discern their watermarks. He then had to examine other books printed between 1450 and 1480 in search of the same watermarks; he found ten, some of which were dated. It comes almost as an anticlimax to report that he dated the missal sometime after 1470, confuting so many distinguished bibliographers who had argued for an earlier date. The point, as Stevenson strongly contended, is the importance of paper as bibliographical evidence, and for this, the investigator needs the original.¹⁷

One perhaps should not leave Stevenson without mentioning his

work in volume 2 of the *Catalogue of Botanical Books in the Collection of Rachel McMaster Miller Hunt*.¹⁸ With each entry he included watermark information. If such information were consistently included in catalogs of early books, it might direct careful editors to the copies needed to solve textual problems. Such careful physical analysis, however, contradicts the current trend to make cataloging routine.

The most such a catalog as Stevenson proposed could do for the textual critic interested in watermarks and imposition would be to provide a guide to copies the editor would need to see. The complexity of the relation of watermarks to text in revealing the order of printing was described long ago by Harris Fletcher in *John Milton's Complete Poetical Works, Vol. II: The First Edition of Paradise Lost*:

Actually, the watermarks in the paper on which existing copies of the first edition of *Paradise Lost* were printed, and the typographical variants as they occur, are the two elements that make it possible to solve and understand most of the more important bibliographical problems connected with the edition. Starting with the known printing practices of the time, it is possible to deal with any copy of the first edition today and account for any important bibliographical fact concerning it, almost entirely on the basis of comparing its printed text with the known typographical variants and its paper with the known varieties used in other copies, identifiable by means of the watermarks which occur therein.¹⁹

In his research, Fletcher used fifty-four original copies and ninety-eight photographic copies.

After citing some studies where access to early editions is essential either in the originals or in photocopies, it is interesting to examine *Erasmus of Christendom*, by Roland Bainton.²⁰ This is a distinguished book by a distinguished scholar. Peter Bietenholz, who has impressive credentials himself as an interpreter of Erasmus, reviewed it as a courageous and bold book, certain to replace the life of Erasmus published by Johan Huizinga in 1924 as the standard biography, although he noted that "most citations are highly selective summaries of what Erasmus really wrote."²¹ In another review, James Tracy praised Bainton for "many fresh observations of the kind only possible for one steeped in the sources."²²

Erasmus was a prolific publisher and letter writer in his time, as were his friends and antagonists, but in his discussion Bainton does not find it necessary to refer to original editions. The bibliography covers fifteen pages, including lists of English translations, modern

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critical editions, and modern critical studies. Sources cited range in date from 1861 to 1968. Of the twenty-two most frequently cited sources, most are modern scholarly periodicals. Only the sixty-two illustrations printed in the book come principally from sources contemporary with Erasmus, with seventeen coming from the author's home base at the Yale University Beinecke Library.

Some tempting inferences follow from this example. One is that humanistic scholarship surrounding a major figure is cumulative, and we need that scholarship at least as much as the original sources. Another inference is that Bainton, "steeped in the sources," as Tracy wrote, had gone through a very long period of assimilating primary source material that enabled him to select, with so much approbation from his peers, the relevant secondary sources to support his new interpretation of Erasmus—a task that obligated him to review earlier interpretations. Accomplished scholar and writer that he is, he did not think it appropriate to cite everything he had ever read. A third inference is that there is nothing like an original to provide illustrations that adorn and/or illuminate the text.

In this brief discussion of the scholarly use today of books printed during the Renaissance, I have not thought it necessary to elaborate on the importance of those early texts for an understanding of the period. This is self-evident. I have tried rather to look at some works of acknowledged scholarship to see what reliance the authors placed on early texts, whether photographic copies could serve the purpose, and how convenient the paths of access are. Several major conclusions may be drawn. (1) To begin with, historical research begins with a review of current scholarship. Starting with nothing, a library seeking to support Renaissance scholarship ought first to acquire bibliographies and the results of current scholarly work. (2) To be sure, original copies of printed books are essential when their artifactual characteristics are in question, as in dating of undated texts. As Bennett's work suggests, however, (3) microforms of early printed books do suffice for many purposes of information, although (4) the lack of comprehensive and articulated bibliographical guides inevitably hampers access to originals, as well as to reprints and microforms. Meanwhile, (5) the conversion of bibliographical information to a machine-readable data base would provide an important flexibility for scholars. Finally, (6) travel grants and fellowships remain relatively economical devices to aid Renaissance scholars in their research.

Studies of Renaissance printed books on a more comprehensive scale might be useful. Citations could be analyzed not only to discover what early editions were cited, but also whether there are later editions and whether microforms are available. The problems encountered in pursuing such an investigation, however, consume much time for finding their solution. In looking for subsequent editions, one can first look for bibliographies of the authors cited, because there is no union bibliography of works published since the fifteenth century. This can be only partially fruitful, however, because the very point of citing some authors is to bring again to light works that have been ignored in succeeding centuries. One can then only look at the catalogs of great libraries and examine the partial bibliographies that have been completed.

To ascertain the existence of microform copies presents equally large problems, because there is no current union catalog of microforms. A report by the Association of Research Libraries published in 1972 begins with the statement: "Bibliographic control of microforms is a foremost need in today's library world."²³ Not surprisingly, it remains so four years and many new publishing projects later. The report made a number of proposals for improvement, such as urging libraries to cooperate better with the *National Register of Microform Masters* and the inclusion of microforms and analytics for them in the MARC (Machine-readable Cataloging) project. These proposals are expensive in many ways to implement, however, and improvement is hard to see. One must still search in the catalogs of various publishers and in indexes of projects.

A statistical count of citations and a follow-up study of new editions and microform reprints would show how often Renaissance scholars rely on early printed books and how accessible alternative sources for them are. Numerical balances, however, could not reveal how essential the early edition would be to the development of a study. A case to illustrate this occurs in an analysis²⁴ made by Frederick Russell of the sources cited in his own work, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*.²⁵ Manuscript sources were inevitably required for such a medieval topic. The number of citations to printed sources, however, far exceeded his citations for manuscript sources. Of his printed sources cited, nineteenth-century standard texts and editions outnumbered all others. (After all, Migne was published in the nineteenth century.) His use of sources varied from chapter to chapter, depending on the development of his subject. In the fifth chapter he discussed the Decretalists from 1190 to 1300, and made 284 citations. Forty percent

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of these were to sixteenth-century printed books, slightly more to manuscripts. Commenting on this, Russell wrote:

An informal and impressionistic hypothesis concerning the Decretalists of Chapter 5 held that the most important sources were to be found in the sixteenth-century works. Given the slight edge that manuscript sources had here, the hypothesis appears untenable. Yet the author is convinced that the most significant material came from sixteenth-century works.²⁶

This testimony to the importance of early printed books seems like a good point on which to end. Russell can hardly be accused of antiquarianism. The manuscript books, which he cited more often, were even older than the sixteenth-century books, which seemed more important to him. However, the manuscript copies from which his early printed editions were set, in most cases, were no longer extant. Thus, the discussion concludes where it began, with Eisenstein's observation that printing permitted scholarship to advance simultaneously on many fronts, because the loss of a manuscript did not result in the loss of a text and the lapse of tradition.

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15. *Ibid.*, pp. 434-37 (Tables 19-20). For a summary of Kaldor's study, see ———. "The Genesis of the Russian *Grazdanskii Shrift* or Civil Type," *Journal of Typographical Research* 3:315-44, Oct. 1969; and 4:111-38, Spring 1970.

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